

U.S. Responses to Axis Aggression (1935-September 1941)

Neutrality Acts (1935-1937) – These laws, passed before war in Europe broke out, created rules regarding relations between American businesses and citizens and countries at war. They required the following:

- No sale or shipment of arms to belligerent countries (countries involved in war)
- No loans or selling goods on credit to belligerent countries
- No travel by U.S. Citizens on the ships of belligerent nations
- Non-military goods purchased by belligerent nations had to be paid for in cash and transported in ships of belligerent nations. This was known as “cash and carry.”

Neutrality Act of 1939 – Passed after the invasion of Poland and official start of the war in Europe, this law allowed American companies to sell arms to belligerent countries but only on a “cash and carry” basis. In other words, the belligerent country had to transport the arms in their own ships and could not buy them on credit.

Selective Service Act (1940) – Passed in September 1940, more than a year before the U.S. entered the war, the law established a “draft” to increase the size of the military. It required all men between 21 and 35 to register. From the 16.4 million registrants, 800,000 were randomly selected to serve in the military.

Destroyers for Bases Deal (1940) – In September 1940, as Britain endured German bombing raids and submarine attacks threatened British control of the Atlantic, President Roosevelt gave 50 older but still useful destroyers (a type of naval vessel) in exchange for giving the U.S. the right to build military bases on British islands in the Atlantic and Caribbean.

Lend Lease Act (March 1941) – This law ended the “cash and carry” requirement of the 1939 Neutrality Act, and allowed the President to sell, lend, lease, or give weapons and ammunition to any nation whose defense he considered vital to the defense of the United States. He said it would be like lending a neighbor a garden hose to put out a fire.

Atlantic Charter (August 1941) – With the U.S. actively aiding Britain, Roosevelt could foresee the possibility that the U.S. might soon be drawn into the war. He arranged for a secret meeting in August 1941 with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill aboard a ship off the coast of Newfoundland. The two leaders drew up a document known as the Atlantic Charter that affirmed what their peace objectives would be when the war ended. They agreed that the general principles for a sound peace would include self-determination for all people, no territorial expansion, and free trade.

“Shoot on Sight” (July 1941) – In July 1941, President Roosevelt ordered the U.S. Navy to escort British ships carrying lend-lease material from the United States as far as Iceland. After an American destroyer was attacked by a German submarine, Roosevelt ordered the navy to attack on German submarines on sight.

Economic Sanctions against Japan – When Japan joined the Axis powers in September 1940, Roosevelt responded by prohibiting the export of steel and scrap iron to all countries except Britain, Canada, and Latin America. In July 1941, after Japanese troops invaded French Indochina (Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia), Roosevelt imposed an embargo of all resources and materials that could be used by their military, including oil.

Questions:

1. How did the U.S. experience in the World War I influence the passage of the Neutrality Acts (1935-1937)?
2. The U.S. declared neutrality while Germany was violating provisions of the Versailles Treaty but before war in Europe broke out? What impact might this have had on German attitudes? Do you think it was wise for the U.S. to declare neutrality before war broke out? Explain.
3. At what point do you think the U.S. abandoned its policy of neutrality? Explain.
4. When do you think the U.S. expected that it would enter the war at some point? Explain.
5. The U.S. "officially" entered the war after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Do you think there was a point when the U.S. unofficially entered the war? Explain.
6. Do you think the U.S. could have prevented World War II? Explain.